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ABSTRACT

To assign grades that accurately communicate student performance, conscientious teachers must ensure their grading is consistent with that of other teachers, reveals student progress, and remains sensitive to impacts on student motivation and parent reaction. Teachers, parents, and administrators of the Round Rock Independent School District in Austin, Texas, met in 1997 to review and revise first-grade report cards, stimulated, in part, by confusion regarding existing report cards and successful changes implemented at the kindergarten level. Criteria emerging from discussions indicate report cards should clearly communicate achievement, provide information about progress toward exit-level standards, be easily understood, provide accurate descriptions of learning, and communicate growth over time. While offering some immediate improvements, an interim report card did not meet all the criteria, and continuing discussions were necessary to engender support for the developmental-continuum approach employed in kindergarten. A steering committee developed a time line, shared information with teachers and parents, and coordinated content-area committees. Planners developed a simple, one-page format that graphically depicts student growth over 9 weeks, progress toward grade-level standards, and information about attendance, special services, student responsibilities, promotion and retention, parent conferences, and reading levels. An Explanation of Stages guide describes key skills and processes linked to developmental progress. Teachers, administrators, and parents provided valuable input during the revision process, and the participation of all stakeholders was critical to project success. (TEJ)

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Building a Better Report Card

Barry Joel Aidman, Jonathan M. Gates, and Elizabeth A. Deterra Sims

For generations, students of all ages have been going home at the end of each grading period with a report card that presents parents with an array of numerical averages, letter grades, and checklists. High grades are celebrated and rewarded; low grades are cause for serious concerns. But what do the grades really represent? Do they reveal what the student knows or can do?

In making out report cards, teachers are faced with the daunting task of assigning grades that communicate an accurate reflection of student learning. Conscientious teachers ask themselves—and sometimes each other—such questions as: Are the grades and the criteria I am using consistent with those of the other teachers? Do the grades I am giving adequately report student progress? What will be their impact on student motivation? How will the parents react?

These were issues that had to be addressed when a committee of teachers, parents, and administrators in the Round Rock Independent School District met in the spring of 1997 to review and revise the district's first-grade report card. The Round Rock district is located in a large and fast-growing suburban area just north of Austin, Texas. Its 24 elementary schools, seven middle schools, four high schools, and an alternative learning center serve nearly 31,000 students.

Needed: A New Report Card

At that time, the district was using different reporting systems for kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. The kindergarten report card, developed several years earlier, showed student progress in all content areas on a six-stage developmental continuum. The first-grade report card was a traditional checklist that reported quarterly student performance on numerous skills in content areas, while the second-grade report card used numerical averages to assess student progress. It was the successful implementation of the kindergarten report card that persuaded the district to consider similar reporting systems for the other primary grades, beginning with the first grade.

Lending urgency to the effort was a lack of consensus among first-grade teachers regarding the significance of the symbols—a check mark, a plus sign, or a minus sign—used to denote student progress. They also could not agree about the skills and concepts to be evaluated. As a result, the first-grade report card was not aligned with new district and state standards. Because any successful revision would require widespread acceptance, a small planning group began by surveying parents, teachers, and administrators for their perceptions and opinions of the first-grade report card. The results confirmed the need for change and provided an impetus to move ahead with the project.

A Band-Aid Beginning

When the survey information was shared with teacher representatives from each school during the first

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committee meeting, there was initial skepticism. A question of trust became apparent when one teacher said, "Since you already know what you want, just give us the new report card and we'll use it." Although central office administrators assured the teachers that they did not already have a product in mind, it was evident that trust would have to be built over time. This would have to be a project done with teachers, rather than to them.

Samples of report cards from other districts were collected and reviewed, along with research on best practices in grade reporting. The ensuing discussions formed the basis for developing evaluation criteria for the new report card that reflected the beliefs of the committee as well as those of prominent researchers:

- The purpose of grading is to clearly communicate the achievement status of students (Guskey 1996).
- Report cards should provide information about student progress toward exit-level standards (Wiggins 1994).
- Report cards should be user-friendly and easily interpreted by parents (Guskey 1996).
- Report cards should provide accurate and understandable descriptions of student learning (Stiggins 1994).
- Report cards should communicate individual student growth over time (Wiggins 1994).

In reviewing the existing report card against these criteria, the magnitude of the project began to unfold. It was evident that a totally new report card was needed, but that it could not be completed prior to the start of the next school year. However, several immediate improvements were possible and so the committee decided to create a one-year "Band-Aid" report card while continuing to work toward a product that met the established criteria.

The interim report card was an improvement in that it was more closely aligned with district and state standards, and easier to understand. But it still did not provide accurate and understandable assessments of student learning and did not show individual student growth over time. In spite of these shortcomings, some teachers seemed satisfied with the improvements and were not eager to commit to the additional time and energy required to complete the project.

In order to move forward, it was necessary to re-examine and recommit to the original intent of the committee and to the agreed-on evaluation criteria. It was only through open dialogue and lengthy discussion that it became obvious that the revised report card would take the form of a developmental continuum conceptually similar to the kindergarten report card. Translating the vision of a developmental continuum onto paper was the next big hurdle.

The Hard Part

Questions arose as work began on the new report card. How could accurate and understandable descriptions of student learning be organized into a user-friendly format? How could consensus be built? To seek answers, the teacher representatives formed content-area committees to write descriptions of student learning that reflected student progress toward grade-level standards in each area. This proved to be quite a challenge. Following a particularly grueling meeting, a committee member remarked, "I thought writing the descriptors would be easy, but it has been tough deciding what information to include or not include."

A steering committee of teachers and administrators kept the project on track by developing a timeline and tackling the logistics of continually sharing information with over 100 teachers and the parents of more than 2,000 first graders. The steering committee also coordinated the efforts of the various content-area committees to align descriptions of student learning within and between content areas.

The descriptions of student learning written by the content-area committees were reviewed by the teacher representative committee, which provided valuable feedback. Still, the process was not without conflict. Meetings with the first-grade teachers were at times tense as some struggled with the concept of a developmental continuum. A few teachers expressed concerns that the new reporting system would require additional time and paperwork. For several teachers, any change in the reporting system was unsettling.

The frequent steering committee meetings were characterized by lively discussions regarding what teachers should expect first graders to know and be able to do at different stages of their developmental journeys. Committee members often had different expectations, based on their own experiences. As the picture of student learning became more focused, the conversation often turned toward classroom instruction and assessment.

The project gained momentum as the participants saw in it the potential not only to improve communication with parents, but also to improve instruction and, ultimately, student learning. One of the dedicated first-grade teachers

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standard from *Early Childhood Education & The Elementary School Principal, Second Edition* (NAESP 1998).

Assessment and Accountability. The principal institutes an approach to student assessment that is consistent with developmental philosophy, curriculum, and positions taken by other professional associations involved with the appropriate testing of young children.

on the steering committee commented, "I look forward to our meetings. I learn more here than in most workshops."

Fitting the Format

A major challenge for the planners was to develop a relatively simple format for the report card, where growth over time could be visually represented. The goal was to balance the amount of information provided with a reporting format that would not overwhelm teachers or parents. Eventually, a one-page, multiple-copy format was developed. It graphically showed student growth over nine-week periods as well as progress toward grade-level standards in each content area. The new format also included information related to attendance, special services, student responsibilities, promotion and retention, parent conferences and reading levels. As much space as possible was reserved for teacher comments. (*To view the report card, go to www.naesp.org/pubs.html.*)

An accompanying Explanation of Stages describes key skills and processes linked to a student's developmental progress through each content area of the first-grade curriculum (*see box*). In addition to the report card and Explanation of Stages, all parents receive a copy of the district's Standards for Academic Excellence, which describe in more detail performance expectations for grade-level skills and concepts in all content areas.

Throughout the revision process, input was regularly sought from teachers, school and central office administrators, and parents. Feedback from these groups provided valuable perspectives. For example, the report card's final design was significantly enhanced by modifications suggested by the district's director of print services.

During the pilot phase of the project, in which more than half of the district's teachers voluntarily participated, parents of current and future first-grade students asked key questions about the report card's content and pointed out confusing educational jargon. Although not all parents agreed about specific details of the proposed report card, they appreciated being included in its development. At the end of one meeting, a parent commented, "Thank you for valuing our input. I'd like to volunteer to work on developing a new second-grade report card next year." Although the process was time-consuming, involving all of the key stakeholders proved to be a critical component in the ultimate success of the report card project.

A Report Card that Works

Although teachers do not need grades to teach well, and students can and do learn without them, the new first-grade report card has had a positive impact on teacher practice. As one teacher commented, "I am talking with my teammates about the evidence we use to place students in a particular stage. Although it takes a lot of time, we are joining together to develop some common assessments." Another teacher stated, "The new report card matches what I am

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

The first-grade report card developed by the Round Rock Independent School District reflects individual progress at nine-week intervals through six developmental stages. In order for a stage to be checked on the report card, the child must perform all of the prescribed descriptors for that stage. In general, students are expected to reach stage four in each content area by the end of first grade.

As an example, these are the descriptors for the six stages of first-grade reading:

Stage 1
- Recognizes that print conveys meaning.
- Retells orally at least one event from a story.
- Recognizes left-right orientation of text.
- Explores letters and sounds.

Stage 2
- Points to words when text is read.
- Retells stories.
- Connects letter sounds with appropriate symbols.
- Recognizes at least five high-frequency words by sight.
- Uses pictures to develop meaning from text.

Stage 3
- Begins to combine phonetic, meaning, and language structure cues to assist in comprehension of text.
- Blends sounds into words orally.
- Reads familiar text with confidence.

Stage 4
- Combines phonetic, meaning, and language structure cues to assist in comprehension of text.
- Reads fluently from increasingly difficult text.

Stage 5
- Combines phonetic, meaning, and language structure cues while decoding and comprehending beyond grade-level expectations.
- Varies reading strategies according to needs.

Stage 6
- Decodes and comprehends significantly beyond grade-level expectations.
- Analyzes information from a variety of texts and relates it to own experiences.

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teaching in my classroom. It gives me a better tool to conference with parents about their child's individual development and learning goals." When surveyed about the new report card, several teachers commented that it has forced them to observe their students more carefully. "I can't just give a check for an average student," said one. "I am expected to communicate specific information to parents about student performance. Because I am now looking at individual student growth, there is less of a chance for any student in my class to fall through the cracks."

A first-grade parent commented, "I never realized I didn't know what a check meant until I saw the Explanation of Stages. The descriptions give me so much more information. Now I know what to work on with my child."

Although the goal of revising the first-grade report card has been realized, there is still work to do. Additional assessments must be developed and the process of examining and improving grade reporting needs to continue. But for the moment, we can see that the new report card has made a difference. Now, when the district's first graders arrive home at the end of a grading period, parents no longer have to ask, "What did you get?" Instead, they are now able to talk with their children about what they know and what they can do.

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